



Lying and Deceit

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Review

LYING AND DECEIT

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A round tower can look square from a distance. A white wall can look red if illuminated by a red light. And if one took these appearances at face value and believed the tower to be square and the wall to be red, one would be deceived. Thus, in the passive mode, where one is deceived, there need be no intentionality in deception. This might be marked by use of the term *misleading*; in these cases appearances are misleading. Similarly, when the Viceroy butterfly mimics the appearance of the Monarch, it signals to the Blue-Jay that it is bad to eat and its appearance is, for this reason, misleading. However, in deceiving someone one acts with the intention that they be misled. Thus, deceit may be provisionally defined as intentionally causing someone to believe a falsehood. Clearly, one can deceive someone in all sorts of ways both linguistic and non-linguistic. Were I to say to you that someone has been opening your mail when it is me who has been doing so, I would no doubt deceive you. I would cause you to believe the falsehood that someone else has been opening your mail, (Williams, 2002: 96). Were I to pack my suitcase with the items needed for the journey you expect me to take, but which I have no intention of taking, I would equally deceive you even though I have told you nothing, (Kant, 1997: 27:446-7) (*see* KANT). However, this provisional definition of deceit needs to be modified in at least one way. If I tell you something with the intention that you believe me and I am sincere but nevertheless wrong, I intentionally cause you to believe a falsehood but I do not deceive you. In this case I have made an honest mistake; I mislead you inadvertently. So the provisional definition should be updated to read: S deceives A if and only if S intentionally causes A to believe something that is false and believed by S to be false, (Carson, 2010: 48). A further worry one might then raise is: can one deceive by omission? Suppose that we have a mutual understanding that you will tell me whenever you visit X and you visit X but fail to tell me. In this case have you deceived me? If you have, it is not by causing me to believe falsely but by causing me to persist in the now false belief that you have not visited X.

Misleading and its intentional relation deceiving are success terms. If S misleads A, A is misled, and if S deceives A, A is deceived, and in both cases the result is that A believes falsely. By contrast, lies are a particular way of *attempting* deception, and an attempt does not equal success. It is possible for S to lie to A without A being deceived; S might succeed in getting A to believe her lie but her lie be true, or A might detect the lie for what it is and not believe it. There are then two key

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2 philosophical issues to do with lying. First, there is the conceptual question: *what is it to lie?* Lying, as
3 an attempt to deceive, is the attempt to intentionally cause someone to believe a believed falsehood.
4 But lying requires more than this; I do not lie to you when I tell you that someone has been opening
5 your mail. Second, there is the normative question: *what is wrong with lying?* Lying, when successful,
6 will be wrong in the way deceiving someone is wrong. But it can also seem to be wrong in a further
7 way; I might balk at telling the lie direct 'I didn't open your mail' yet feel more easy about implying
8 this falsehood.
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15 What is it to lie? Perhaps Bernard Williams articulates the simplest and canonical definition
16 when he says, "I take a lie to be an assertion that is believed to be false, which is made with the
17 intention to deceive the hearer with respect to that content", (Williams, 2002: 96) (*see* WILLIAMS,
18 BERNARD). For the sake of comparison, this may be formulated thus: (1) S's utterance U to A is a lie
19 if and only if (i) in uttering U, S asserts p, (ii) S intends A believe that p, (iii) S believes that p is false.
20 On this definition, four things are necessary, and jointly sufficient, for lying. Lying requires an
21 assertion, so one does not lie by the act of packing one's suitcase when one is not going on holiday.
22 Lying requires one assert something to an audience, so one does not lie to those who merely overhear
23 one's conversation. Lying requires that one be untruthful and not believe what one asserts, so if one
24 honestly gets things wrong, one doesn't lie. Lying requires one intend to deceive one's audience, so
25 the assertion of a falsehood as a joke is not lie. In this respect lying can be contrasted with perjury. If,
26 under oath, one asserts a falsehood with no intention to deceive, one commits perjury but does not lie.
27 And if, again under oath, one asserts a truth with an intention to deceive, which one mistakenly
28 believes to be false, one lies but does not commit perjury. See (Mahon, 2008).
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40 On this definition, my saying to you that someone has been opening your mail is not a lie
41 because I believe what I assert. The implication that that person is not me is not asserted.
42 Nevertheless, one might think, if not in this case at least in some, that what is implied *is told*. Suppose
43 I say to you that some of my students cut class when no one showed up. I do not assert that some
44 students *did come* to class but, arguably, this implication is sufficiently clear I can be said to have told
45 you this. And to this extent my utterance can be regarded as a lie. This suggests that the focus should
46 be on tellings and not assertions, and that Williams's definition should be rewritten thus: (2) S's
47 utterance U to A is a lie if and only if (i) in uttering U, S tells A that p, (ii) S intends A believe that p,
48 (iii) S believes that p is false.
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56 There is, I think, another reason to regard lies as a species of tellings. In lying one seeks to
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intention is not merely that A believe that p, which S believes to be false, but also that A believe that p because A believes S, the speaker. Were S to intend that A believe that p merely on the evidence of his utterance, then, rather than lying, S would be attempting a deception akin to packing his suitcase when he is not going on holiday. It is possible to make this point by contrasting a lie with a complex bluff. Consider St. Augustine's (*see* AUGUSTINE, SAINT) example of two travellers S and A where S knows that bandits plague a certain road, A wants to know whether this road is safe or not, knows that S can answer this question, but does not trust S, see (Augustine, 1952). Augustine's example is case one, the bluff: S wants to warn A so tells him the road is safe. This is not a lie, even though S is untruthful, because S has no deceptive intent. Rather, S desires to inform A the road is dangerous, and given A's distrust, presumes A will take his utterance as evidence to this effect. Now consider case two, the double bluff: S wants to deceive A so tells him the road is full of bandits. Again, this is not a lie, even though S's intent is deceptive, because S tells the truth. However, in telling the truth S is also pretending to lie and, given A's distrust, presumes A will take his utterance as a lie, and so as evidence that the road is safe. And case three, the triple bluff: S wants to deceive A so tells him the road is safe. Even though this would be regarded as a lie by Williams's definition, it is not a lie insofar as S intends to achieve his deception on the basis of A's distrust and the presumption that A will thereby regard his utterance as a pretend lie, see (Faulkner, 2007: 537). What lies require, and what is absent in all three of these cases, is then that the liar intend there be a certain uptake of the lie, namely that he, the liar, will be believed. And this is implied by the claim that lies are a species of telling.

Tellings are defined intentionally (*see* INTENTION). In telling someone something, one intends to get them to believe what is told, *and* intends that they form this belief *because* they recognise that this is what one intends. That is, in uttering U, S tells A that p iff (i) S intends that A believe that p, and (ii) S intends that A believe that p because A recognises that (i). Since we do not ordinarily regard someone's intending that we do something as a reason to do that thing, tellings operate by invoking an audience's trust (*see* TRUST). This is what is lacking in the three cases of bluff. And since it is an implication of the fact that S's utterance is a telling that S intends to induce belief, clause (ii) can be dropped from definition (2). This gives the following simple definition of a lie: (2*) S's utterance U to A is a lie if and only if (i) in uttering U, S tells A that p, and (ii) S believes that p is false. This is my view of what lies are.

A problem that both this definition and Williams's confront is that of bare-faced lies, or the assertion of a falsehood in a context where it is common knowledge that what is asserted is false. Sorenson gives this example. "Once when the pianist Anton Rubinstein was practicing, the telephone

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2 rang inconveniently. His servant Francois picked up the phone and reported to the female caller that
3 the maestro was not at home. She objected 'But I hear him playing'. 'You are mistaken, Madame'
4 insisted Francois 'I'm dusting the piano keys'" (Sorenson, 2007: 253). Francois lied to the caller, but
5 he could not intend to deceive her. So, it is argued, definitions (1) and (2) must fail of necessity. In
6 response to cases like this, Carson suggests that even if a liar does not intend to deceive, he still
7 warrants the truth of what he asserts. So he proposes the following definition of lying. (3) S's
8 utterance U to A is a lie if and only if (i) in uttering U, S asserts p, (ii) S believes that p is false, (iii) p
9 is false, and (iv) S warrants the truth of p to A, (Carson, 2010: 30).

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17 Two worries might be raised about (3). First, it does not seem to be a condition on lying that a
18 lie be false. Suppose a fugitive asks S to harbour him, and S hides him in the bedroom just before his
19 pursuer knocks and asks, 'Is the fugitive here?' If S answers, 'No he is not in the house', then even if
20 what S says is true – the fugitive fled panic-stricken – S lied nevertheless. Second, it is not clear that
21 replacing the 'intention to deceive' condition with a 'warranting the truth' one adequately addresses
22 the problem of bare-faced lies. The problem is that S can warrant the truth of p to A only if it is
23 epistemically possible for A that p. And this is not so when it is common knowledge that p is false, see
24 (Sorenson, 2007: 254). Both these worries can be addressed, Carson argues, by giving a more
25 'internal' version of (3), namely: (4) S's utterance U to A is a lie if and only if (i) in uttering U, S
26 asserts p, (ii) S believes that p is false, and (iii) S intends to warrant the truth of p to A, (Carson, 2010:
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36 Fallis equally proposes his definition of lies in response to the phenomenon of bare-faced lies.
37 He proposes: (5) S's utterance U to A is a lie if and only if (i) in uttering U, S asserts p, (ii) S believes
38 that p is false, (Fallis, 2009: 33). But then he supplies a particular notion of assertion: to assert
39 something is to say something in a context one believes to be governed by the Gricean norm, 'do not
40 say what one believes to be false'. Thus, fully specified (5) reads: (5*) S's utterance U to A is a lie if
41 and only if (i) in uttering U, S asserts p, (ii) S believes that p is false, and (iii) S believes the following
42 norm is in place, "*Do not make statements you believe to be false.*" (Fallis, 2009: 34). This third condition
43 functions much like the 'intention to deceive' condition. Jokes and assertions made in the course of a
44 play are not lies according to analyses (1) and (2) because there is no intention to deceive. And they
45 are not lies according to (5*) because when a conversation occurs in a play or when its purpose is
46 humorous the Gricean norm is not in operation. Meanwhile, bare-faced lies are recognized as lies
47 because they are the assertion of believed falsehoods in a context where this norm is in operation (*see*
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NORMATIVITY).

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2 The problem with this analysis concerns those assertions, like ‘some of my students cut class’,
3 with implications so obvious that the speaker is lying if these are believed to be false. (Or so I
4 suggested in proposing (2).) Specifically, it concerns assertions uttered sarcastically. Fallis’s example
5 is Han Solo uttering “The garbage chute was a really wonderful idea. What an incredible smell you’ve
6 discovered!” (Fallis, 2009: 52-3). The implication that jumping into the garbage chute was a *bad* idea
7 is so obvious that Solo is clearly telling his interlocutor this and would be lying if he thought
8 otherwise. But according to (5*) Solo is lying because he believes that what he asserts is false and the
9 context is governed by the norm that one should not assert what one believes is false. Fallis’s
10 response to this problem is that sarcasm functions “retroactively” to turn this norm off, (Fallis, 2009:
11 53). However, the presumption that this norm is in operation is necessary, at least on Grice’s account,
12 for understanding implicature. Without this presumption, what Solo meant by his utterance – the
13 obvious implication – would not be comprehensible. By contrast, analysis (2) gives a simple account of
14 Solo’s utterance. He tells what he implies, and since he believes this, his utterance is not a lie.
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25 An alternative response to the problem posed by bare-faced lies is then simply to deny that
26 these utterances are lies. Arguably they are not so just because the speaker lacks any intention to
27 deceive, and equally would seem to lack any intention to warrant the truth of what is said. The
28 confusion, it might be added, stems from the fact that bare-faced lies are similar to lies in two
29 respects. First, in saying to the caller that the maestro is not at home, Francois purports to be telling
30 her something. But his utterance does not have the force of a telling because he lacks the requisite
31 intentions. He does not intend that the caller believe what he says, nor does he intend to warrant the
32 truth of what he says. Whereas in lying to A, S would intend both these things, and would so because
33 lies are tellings. It is the act of telling that is then fundamental, not the act of warranting the truth,
34 thus (2) is to be preferred to (4). Second, part of what we are doing when we make a judgement that
35 an utterance is a lie is making a normative judgement. And this judgement, I agree with Fallis, is
36 partly that lies flout Grice’s maxim of quality. So bare-faced lies are similar to lies in that they exhibit
37 a normative failing of lies. However, this normative judgement should not be the means by which lies
38 are identified. This is what is wrong with (5*): what is wrong with lying is a further and separate
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51 What is wrong with lying?² According to MacIntyre there are two traditions in answering this
52 question, (MacIntyre, 1995). The first, which he traces to Plato (*see* PLATO), regards the wrong of
53 lying as the wrong of deception. Lying is wrong because of the damage that deceit does, both to the
54 deceived and to the trust that is necessary for society (*see* CONSEQUENTIALISM). And since more
55 harm can come from a failure to lie than from a lie, lying can be permissible. It would be so when
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2 telling the truth would cause a greater harm. The second tradition, which MacIntyre traces to
3 Aristotle (*see* ARISTOTLE), regards all lies as impermissible. It might be permissible to deceive
4 someone, but then some other means should be employed other than lying. The example of Saint
5 Athanasius, who replied to his persecutors' question 'Where is the traitor Athanasius?' with the
6 deceptive but truthful 'Not far away', is salutary. The most famous advocate of this Aristotelian
7 tradition is Kant; or infamous given his claim that it would be wrong even to lie to a murderer at
8 one's door who is seeking a fugitive one is harbouring. Such a lie would be wrong because it is a
9 misuse of the institution of assertion, since in lying "I bring it about ... that statements (declarations)
10 in general are not believed", (Kant, 1996: 8:426). Respect for the truth in assertion is essential to both
11 human society and rationality generally. More recently, this tradition is expressed in Bok's "principle
12 of veracity", which states, "that truthful statements are preferable to lies in the absence of special
13 considerations", (Bok, 1978: 30). While a defence of the Platonic tradition is found in Williams's claim
14 that "if deceit is justified at all, as in defending the innocent fugitive, something is wrong if one thinks
15 that it is more honourable to find some weasel words than to tell a lie", (Williams, 2002: 107).

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27 A problem for the Platonic tradition is that the reduction of the wrong of lying to a wronging
28 – the wrong of deception – does not fit with our attitudes. We do draw a distinction between lying
29 and deceiving by false implication, and often feel easier about the latter. Moreover, that we think
30 there is a unique wrong of untruthfulness is shown by the shame that can be felt in being detected in a
31 lie, (*see* SHAME) where there is no space to claim, as Williams's mail-opener might, that one did not
32 mean that. For instance, consider being forced to declare, in a show trial or to achieve a domestic
33 conciliation, that one did such-and-such when one did not. One can feel shame at this, feel that one's
34 act is wrong, even if one takes there to be, and there is, no deception (*see* MORAL PSYCHOLOGY).
35 On the other hand, a problem for the Aristotelian tradition is that no philosophical justification seems
36 fit for purpose. The absolute prohibition on lies cannot be based on the need for such social goods as
37 cooperation and trust when these are more effectively undermined by deceit, which is allowed.
38 Williams's mail-opener tells the truth, but it is her untrustworthiness that threatens any good
39 relations. And it is equally hard to see how the intelligibility or rationality of assertion could ground
40 such a prohibition either. Intelligibility, arguably, requires no more than that one cannot be largely
41 wrong about others' attitudes, not that we always need to be truthful. And rationality seems to
42 primarily forge a connection between belief and truth, rather than utterance and truth (*see*
43 RATIONALITY). At the level of utterance, lying can have a clear practical rationality. So to insist
44 that deceit can be fine when untruthfulness never is seems, as Williams's remarks to make a "fetish" of
45 assertion, (Williams, 2002: 107).

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2 The solution, as I see it, is to agree with the Platonic tradition that certain lies are permissible,
3 and yet agree with the Aristotelian tradition that there is a unique wrong of untruthfulness, and so a
4 wrong to lying over and above that of deception. This is to suppose that our conversations as to the
5 facts are dominated by two norms. The first is identified by Fallis's definition, (5*) above. Our
6 conversations, Grice claimed, are defined by the presumption that they are cooperative. And when a
7 conversation is one as to the facts, when it purports to be information or knowledge imparting, this is
8 the presumption that a speaker is trying to be informative, where this carries the implication that the
9 speaker is not trying to be deceptive. This is a presumption of conversation because it is a normative
10 commitment, and one that is flouted by both lies and those utterances that deceive by false
11 implication. Call this the *norm of informativeness*. Williams's mail-opener contravenes this norm and in
12 doing so is untrustworthy, while Han Solo does not and is not. This norm might be given a general
13 philosophical justification, given that it seems essential to cooperative endeavour. But insofar as a
14 greater good would come from non-cooperation, being uninformative, or in addition deceitful, could,
15 on the same grounds, be permissible. The second norm is then a consequence of this norm of
16 informativeness in its application to simple tellings. It is that a speaker should try and say what is
17 believed to be true. Call this the *norm of truthfulness*. This holds as a consequence of the fact that our
18 social model of informing people of things is that of telling how things are. However, insofar as this
19 norm is a consequence of the application of a more general norm to a particular social institution its
20 prohibitions do not carry independent sanction; even if the patterns of shame and blame (*see*
21 BLAME) that the norm is associated with exist independently.

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37 Lies are then normatively unique in that they violate both these norms, and we
38 correspondingly tend to regard the judgement that something is a lie as a uniquely negative
39 judgement. However, at this juncture, three things should be observed. First, these norms are not
40 uniquely violated by lies. An utterance with a deceptive implication violates the norm of
41 informativeness but might be truthful. Equally, omitting to disclose a truth, your visit to X, in a
42 context where such disclosure is expected can violate the norm of informativeness but would not
43 violate the norm of truthfulness. Bare-faced lies, on the other hand, violate the norm of truthfulness
44 but not that of informativeness since the common knowledge of their falsehood ensures that there is
45 no presumption that the utterance is informative, (and so, I suggested, they merely pretend to be
46 tellings). Second, both these norms are defeasible. Faced with the murderer at the door, being
47 informative in one's reply would be the wrong thing to do, as if this need be said. And, at the other
48 end of the scale, one should not inform Uncle X that he has bad breath or Aunt Y that she has a
49 moustache. And just as it can be rude and insensitive to inform people of things, so truthfulness can
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equally be so. Third, these norms are not always congruent. Just as one can be truthful and deceptive,
so one can be untruthful and informative. Augustine's example of the travellers, case one above, is
such case; and another is Ekman's example of a worker who replies 'I'm fine' to his boss's query, 'How
are you this morning?' This answer is untruthful, he has been quarrelling with his wife, but it
communicates a truth: he is ready for his working day nevertheless, (Ekman, 1992: 328).

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The judgement that an utterance is a lie carries a strongly evaluative sentiment. But a similar
evaluation is possible of utterances that are not lies. This, I think, explains the empirical data that
motivates Coleman and Kays' prototype or paradigm case analysis of lies, see (Coleman and Kay,
1981). According to this analysis, it is not the case that an utterance either is a lie or is not a lie,
rather an utterance can be more or less a lie. An utterance is a lie to the degree it approximates a
prototype or paradigm case lie, which they specify as follows. (6) In asserting that p to A, S's utterance
U is a *prototypical-lie* if and only if (i) S believes that p is false, (ii) S intends A to believe that p, which S
believes is false, and (iii) p is false. So the satisfaction of any condition (i), (ii) or (iii) is sufficient to
make U more or less a lie, and it will be more a lie the more conditions it satisfies. Conversely, I
would argue, even though it satisfies (6)(iii), an honest mistake is not a lie. And even though an
utterance that deceives by false implication satisfies (6)(ii) and (iii), it is not a lie – and its not being so
can be its point. A lie is both untruthful and made with deceptive intent, right enough. In being so, a
lie breaches both the norms of truthfulness and informativeness, and for this reason, lies are similar to
other utterances with these normative failings. So insofar as part of what we are doing when we
classify an utterance as a lie is making a normative judgement, we obscure the boundary between lies
and other utterances. But these normative judgements should be kept clear from classificatory ones.
That said, these classificatory boundaries are blurry given definition (2*), and this can be regarded as a
problem for this definition. According to (2*), an utterance is a lie if it is a telling and believed to be
false. And one can tell things by *obvious* implication. But how obvious need an implication be to be a
telling? Did the mail-opener really escape the lie? These things are unclear. (And the boundaries
become more blurred when one moves away from our social model of tellings. Is a Russian speaker
lying, for instance, when he engages in *vranyo* or the practice of fabricating fanciful stories that an
audience should partly believe and partly admire?)

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Lies are normatively unique in that they breach both norms of informativeness and
truthfulness. Lies are also wrong in a further way. As tellings, lies invoke trust. It is only when an
audience trusts a speaker for the truth that the audience will see the speaker's intention that they, the
audience, believe that p as *itself a reason* to believe that p. So in telling A that p, S invokes A's trust,
and in lying to A, S likewise invokes A's trust. The further wrong of lies is then that they invoke trust

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2 only to betray it, see (Faulkner, 2007). In this respect, Simpson similarly observes, a liar is “doubly
3 insincere” in that the liar “insincerely presents a belief and insincerely invokes trust in this
4 presentation”, (Simpson, 1992: 625). It is this aspect of lies, I hypothesize, that partly explains our
5 poverty at identifying when we are being lied to. Confronted with a speaker telling us something, we
6 correctly judge that the speaker is asking for our trust and so, unless we know that things are
7 otherwise, we feel that we ought to believe them. It is this sense of obligation that then makes it
8 difficult to accuse the speaker of lying to us. For references to the empirical data showing our poverty
9 at discerning lies and further explanations of this, see (O'Sullivan, 2009).

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17 Our grounds for the judgement that an utterance is a lie are ordinarily one of two things:
18 either the lie does not fit with what else we believe to be the case; or it does not fit with other things
19 that the liar says. This is a burden of lying: shoring up the lie with a consistent background story. It
20 is easy, it has been said, to tell a lie, but hard to tell only one. However, these grounds for lie-
21 detection are limited – as tellings purport to be informative, lies take us into new terrain, and
22 consistency can be managed – but there are other grounds that are more universally present. Putting
23 the various pathologies aside, lying arouses emotions in the liar, which, for the lie to be successful,
24 need to be masked. The masking of these feelings then leaves clues that can be detected, and which
25 reliably indicate the lie, see (Ekman, 1992). As it happens we are bad at recognising these clues, but
26 would we want things otherwise? Clearly, it would be a bad thing if we could never detect when
27 someone was suppressing their emotions. This would imply that we could never be confident in our
28 judgements of how someone felt, and our relations would be so much less certain as a consequence.
29 But it is not clear that we should want any ability better than the imperfect one we have. Sometimes,
30 Ekman observes, “lie catching violates a relationship, betrays trust, steals information that was not,
31 for good reason, given”, (Ekman, 1992: 328). For this reason, it is a good thing that a smile is not
32 always a reliable sign of pleasure, and that appearances can be deceptive.

33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 **SEE ALSO:**

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50 ARISTOTLE; AUGUSTINE, SAINT; BLAME; CONSEQUENTIALISM; INTENTION; KANT;
51 MORAL PSYCHOLOGY; NORMATIVITY; PLATO; RATIONALITY; SHAME; TRUST;
52 WILLIAMS, BERNARD.
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